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'Project' under gun

Reagan's \$85 million plan for democracy challenged

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WASHINGTON — Project Democracy, the Reagan administration's \$85 million plan to counter Soviet propaganda by spreading American-style institutions and ideas abroad, especially in the Third World and Central America, is running into trouble at home.

Sen. Paul E. Tsongas (D., Mass.), a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, calls it "Project Right-Wing Democracy." Some of his moderate and liberal colleagues express fears that it will become a new and expensive propaganda tool of the administration, and they threaten a major fight that one Senate official says could cut the program in half and "minimize its propaganda content."

Rep. Joel Pritchard (R., Wash.) remarked at a recent House hearing that the more he thought about the plan, "the more nervous I become over it." Replied the witness before him, Secretary of State George P. Shultz, "Don't be nervous about democracy, about holding that torch up there."

Charles Wick, director of the U.S. Information Agency and a friend of President Reagan's, is widely credited with the idea of Project Democracy. Wick said of the plan, which he first called Project Truth, "In a world where freedom is under attack, the concept of human liberty and the concept of America are more compelling and attractive than ever."

What is all the talk about?

It is about a 44-point bill submitted to Congress on Feb. 23 that includes plans to educate potential military leaders so that they will be discouraged from staging coups, to wean Latin American student leaders away from Marxism and anti-Americanism, to finance a regional newspaper in Central America and to support journalists in the region who resist control of the press by "totalitarian or authoritarian" regimes.

It is about legislation that, beyond Latin America, proposes to teach English to poor Africans; to back free labor unions worldwide; to finance a magazine, named Communications Impact, that would "champion free communications"; to build a center for Soviet emigres; to promote business through a Center for Free Enterprise, and to establish centers for the study of the United States abroad in order to teach U.S. democratic values.

Here are some specifics of the main proposals in the idea, first mentioned by the President in a speech June 8 to the British Parliament:

- Under the title Study of Democratic Principles and Practice for Military Leaders in Developing Nations, \$1.7 million would be spent to show military men the need for "positive attitudes toward democracy" and an awareness that "military-led interruptions of the political process can retard the development of a democratic form of government." An administration official said the plan would end the cycle of coups and counter coups in the developing world, mainly in Latin America. "Ultimately this would also assure stability in trouble spots such as Central America," he said.

- About \$800,000 is provided to train Caribbean and Central American students in American values because such students "are more likely to be instructed in Marxist political and economic philosophy than in democratic and free market economies."

- Some \$3.2 million would create a regional organization for Central America and the Andes to teach area leaders such sophisticated democratic techniques as party organization, campaigning, fund-raising, polling, media management, advance work. "In other words," a critical congressional aide said, "we would seek to create little replicas of Ronald Reagan or Walter Mondale in the hemisphere."

- One of the most controversial items, at \$240,000, is entitled Support for the Free Press in Latin America. Though the bill mentions only scholarship programs for 10 young Latin American journalists and two professorships in communications, State Department officials do not rule out the possibility of providing money to newspapers "struggling" in "undemocratic nations."

In a March 2 hearing, Tsongas quoted from what he said was an official document suggesting that the administration would provide funds to the Inter-American Press Association through an intermediary because the group did not accept money from governments. Asked if the administration would "operate" through the press association, Wick, whose agency would manage Project Democracy, replied "yes." Later Wick indicated that the association was not being considered and that it was mentioned as an "illustrative measure" only.

- Another \$1.1 million is for financing, through the private Simon Bolivar Foundation here, a regional newspaper for rural populations in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. "The newspaper would provide information in such areas as family health, agricultural management and the merits of supporting democracy," according to the bill.

Other projects outside the hemisphere would spend \$2 million for regional institutes to provide technical assistance and observers for nations holding elections for the first time or after a coup; \$1.5 million in seed money to bring young leaders to the United States for briefings on American foreign policy and security objectives; \$10.6 million to set up American Studies Centers in various countries; and \$885,000 to heighten "understanding of democracy" in Eastern Europe.

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